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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3628  
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RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 6155  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2992  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000976

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS, SCA/RA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/27/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM CE

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT RAJAPAKSA AND AMBASSADOR DISCUSS  
POLITICAL SOLUTION, SLOWER MILITARY PROGRESS AND  
LIKELIHOOD OF REDUCED INDIAN PRESSURE

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: On the margins of ceremonies opening a USAID-funded vocational training center in President Rajapaksa's hometown of Tangalle on October 26, Ambassador and the President discussed a range of important issues. The President indicated he wants to become more personally involved in helping to find a political solution, which is risky if he is not prepared to deliver. He acknowledged military progress had been slowed by the onset of the monsoon and, unlike his commanders, refused to predict whether it would be possible to capture Kilinochchi by the end of 2008. He assessed that Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi's recent pressure on the Government of India regarding Sri Lanka was mostly political theater that Sri Lanka would be able to manage. As always we found the President mostly preoccupied with prosecuting the war, and neutralizing his political opposition. End Summary.

Political Solution

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¶12. (C) Ambassador commended President Rajapaksa for taking the initiative to invite Opposition Leader Wickremasinghe for talks and for his decision to accelerate deliberations of the All Parties Representative Committee (APRC). The Ambassador asked the President if he had a deadline in mind for concluding the APRC's work. The President said that would be up to the APRC, but he wanted to become more personally involved in helping to find a political solution. The President also indicated he had invited the Tamil National Alliance for talks so he could get a better understanding from them of their key goals for a political solution. He lamented, however, that the TNA was equivocating. Ambassador undertook to talk to TNA to urge them to engage.

Military

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¶13. (C) Ambassador observed that the military's progress appeared to have slowed in the north. Rajapaksa acknowledged this was so because of the onset of the monsoon. He said air power could not be used as frequently, armored vehicles were bogged down, and it was harder to resupply the troops. Ambassador asked if the President still hoped to capture

Pooneryn by year's end and thereby open a land route to Jaffna. Rajapaksa said he did, but he was less sanguine about capturing Kilinochchi by the end of 2008. The monsoons would give the LTTE something of an opportunity to regroup. He also expressed concern about LTTE resupply from India noting that while the capture of Pooneryn would help close off smuggling by Indian fishing boats on the west coast, many boats would still make deliveries in the northeast, thanks to large bribes from the LTTE.

"Poison" Gas Use

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¶14. (C) The President categorically stated the LTTE was using poison gas. Ambassador observed this appeared to be tear gas of the kind used for riot control. Rajapaksa insisted it was worse because Sri Lankan troops have suffered burns, though no deaths. Ambassador asked why the Government of Sri Lanka did not publicize this to expose the LTTE. The President said the Government of Sri Lanka did not want to alarm the troops or say anything that might hurt recruiting efforts.

Karunanidhi Concern Mostly Political Theatrics

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¶15. (C) Ambassador asked for the President's views on how far he expected Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi to press the Government of India on Sri Lanka. The President responded that Karunanidhi's recent tough line was mostly to keep his opponents in Tamil Nadu off balance. Rajapaksa even admitted (please protect) he had received word from

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Karunanidhi that as long as Sri Lanka took care of the civilians, spoke of a political solution and did not criticize Karunanidhi, he would be satisfied. With fewer demands from Tamil Nadu, continued good humanitarian resupply, and care for low civilian casualties, the President thought he would likewise be able to keep the Government of India satisfied.

Elections

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¶16. (C) Asked for his thoughts on possible early elections, Rajapaksa confirmed he did not plan to call for early Presidential elections before his term expires in 2011. However, he said he had not decided whether to call for early Parliamentary elections, which must be held by the spring of ¶2010. He indicated he would call for new Provincial Council elections in the first half of 2009 as scheduled. However he had not yet decided the sequencing, particularly when to hold the Western Province elections, where opposition to him is likely to be strongest.

East

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¶17. (C) Ambassador expressed concern about the apparent rift within the TMVP between Karuna and Pillayan, which had slowed down cooperation on releasing child soldiers. Rajapaksa agreed the rift was a concern, which was why he had made Karuna a Member of Parliament. The President pledged continued support for Pillayan as the Eastern Province Chief Minister. Ambassador observed that devolution of responsibilities to the Eastern and other provinces under the 13th Amendment was not taking place, in spite of the President's support. Rajapaksa acknowledged this, but said he was committed to effecting devolution. Returning to Pillayan, the President commented that he wanted to continue to help Pillayan learn, commenting that his trip to Japan had been useful. Rajapaksa mused it might be useful for Pillayan to visit the United States. Ambassador said he would be pleased to look into the possibility if Pillayan was interested.

Bio Note

18. (C) The President indicated his middle son Rohitha would be completing his naval training within a month and entering active duty. He would be stationed at the naval base in Trincomalee as part of the units that patrol the dangerous waters between Trinco and Jaffna. The Ambassador observed this was arguably the hottest naval sector. The President agreed, but noted his son wanted to serve without favors. He acknowledged experiencing the same concerns that the British Royal family faced in considering Prince Harry's service in Iraq, namely that if the LTTE became aware that Rohitha was in a particular unit, that would raise the risk for all those serving with him.

Comment

19. (C) As always we found the President mostly preoccupied with prosecuting the war, and neutralizing his political opposition. The President's pledge to become more involved in breaking the impasse over finding a political solution is welcome, but risky and therefore may not materialize. More than one senior Minister has told us that with Parliamentary elections coming in 2010 or earlier, and the hardline JHU and JVP steadfastly opposed to any political solution, it is unlikely the President will be willing to endorse any solution that could diminish the ruling party's electoral prospects. The President therefore runs the risk of creating false expectations about a political solution that could hurt his credibility when not met. The uncertain military situation was much on the President's mind. Since he has staked much of his Presidency on continued military success,

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the LTTE successes in slowing or halting progress during the monsoon and after could hurt the ruling party's prospects in the 2009 Provincial Council elections.

Blake